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SUBJECT: END OF THE ROAD: THE LAST IMAM OF OMAN DIES, BUT...

CLASSIFIED BY: L Victor HurtadoL, CDA, State, Exec; REASON: 1.4(D)

¶1. (SBU) The last Ibadi Imam of Oman, Imam Ghalib bin Ali al Hinai, passed away on November 29, 2009, in the eastern Saudi city of Dammam where had been living in self-exile. He was 96 years of age. Ibadi (the dominant sect in Oman) Imams are traditionally elected. As there is no successor, this nominally brings to an end the Imamate in Oman. There has been no domestic press coverage of the Imam's passing.

¶2. (SBU) At one time Oman was two nations, Muscat on the coast, ruled by the Sultan and Oman in the interior, ruled by the Imam. Fighting between the two leaders in the early part of the last century ended with the 1920 Treaty of Seeb which created one country (called Muscat and Oman) but granted autonomy to the Imam in the interior, with a capital at Nizwa. In the 1950s, Imam Ghalib rebelled against Sultan Said bin Taimur (father of the current Sultan). The rebellion was crushed and Ghalib went into exile. He campaigned against Taimur from exile, with the support of Arab nationalists such as Gamal Abdel Nasser. In 1970, the current Sultan, Qaboos, overthrew his father, renamed the country Oman, and began Oman's current modernization process. Ironically, one Ghalib's complaints against Taimur was the Sultan's unwillingness to modernize the country. Ghalib's sons returned to Oman and occupied substantive positions in the government, but Ghalib decided to remain in exile.

¶3. (SBU) In 2005, the Omani government convicted 31 Islamists for establishing an illegal organization for the reported purpose of overthrowing the Sultan and reestablishing the Imamate. There was no reported support by Ghalib for this plot. The 31 plotters were tried and sentenced to prison, but Sultan Qaboos pardoned them in the following month and little is said of the event.

¶4. (SBU) Ibadi Omani pilgrims to the Hajj were known to call on Ghalib during their travel. In recent days, Omani internet chatrooms have been full of condolences for the late Imam. His quiet departure seemingly closes the doors on the Imamate and demonstrates the degree of reconciliation that Qaboos' rule has brought about.

¶5. (C) Sultan Qaboos alluded to a previous U.S. Ambassador that he considered himself to be the Ibadi Imam. He pointedly wore the white Ibadi Imam's white turban while on his recent visit to Shia Iran. That said, the Sultan declines to make an issue of it by asserting the role publically. This could also explain why there was no press coverage of Ghalib's death: in the view of the Sultan, the Imamate continues.  
Hurtado